

# Counting of votes, Athenian style

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The Greeks, specifically the Athenians, are generally credited with the invention of democracy. And ‘one man one vote’ and the counting of votes are basic to what we think of as democracy. The Athenian Thucydides remarks with some contempt that in Sparta decisions of the assembly are made ‘by shout and not by ballot’. The magistrates simply decided which side shouted louder! But how did the Athenians count votes?

In classical Athens two kinds of voting were employed: the assembly voted by a show of hands and the popular courts by ballot. The vote by ballot is known in every detail thanks to the account given by Aristotle in the *Constitution of Athens* and to the discovery of several bronze ballots (*psephoi*). We know next to nothing about how the people voted by show of hands (*cheirotomia*) and in particular how the result of the vote was determined.

The only explicit evidence – which concerns the fourth century B.C. – is one line in Aristotle’s *Constitution of Athens* telling us that the chairmen of the meetings of the assembly, the nine *proedroi*, judge the votes taken by show of hands. Until recently a common rendering of the passage was that ‘the *proedroi* count the votes’. But how? Most meetings of the assembly were attended by over 6,000 citizens. And how can one count 6,000 hands? It has been suggested that the Athenians stood organized in their ten tribes (*phylai*), that, accordingly, there must have been ten tellers, i.e. the nine *proedroi* supplemented with the secretary of the council, and that each was responsible for the count of one tenth of the attendants, i.e. a total of ca. 600.

## Stretching the hand

The verb used to describe voting by show of hands is *cheirotonein*, which means ‘to stretch out the hand’ and, unlike other verbs for voting which are often used metaphorically, *cheirotonein* must be taken in the literal sense of the word. In Aristophanes’ *The Women in Assembly*, a comic fantasy in which the women take over the assembly, the women are reminded that in the assembly on the Pnyx hill they have to raise their arms instead of (as usual) their legs. And Xenophon tells us that in 406 B.C., when the people heard the trial of the eight generals charged with treason, the first session was adjourned because it was too late to see the hands. Several sources state that the show of hands was conducted by stages: when the people voted on a proposal first the ayes and then the noes were asked to raise their hands. No form of division was practised.

But how were the votes computed? As stated above, the meetings of the Athenian assembly were usually attended by over 6,000 citizens who sat down during the meetings and must have voted from their seats. To conduct an exact count of a total of some 6,000 hands raised by two stages is simply impossible. And any attempt to make an approximate count would take at least ten minutes. A total of twenty-five shows of hands is a moderate estimate of the votings conducted during a single session. Suppose, for example, that one of the decrees passed by the people was an alliance prescribing that ten envoys be forthwith elected from among all the Athenians. Such a decree would require a minimum of eleven successive shows of hands. Even approximate counts would consume over four hours of a meeting that usually lasted half a day or less.

When the sources at our disposal are insufficient, and when our interpretation of the few sources we have depends on a priori

assumptions about what can and what cannot be done, the obvious method is to look for parallels and see whether better known votings by show of hand practised in other societies can confirm our a priori assumptions and shed new light on our sources.

## Vote-counting Swiss style

The best known parallel is the Swiss popular assemblies, the so-called *Landsgemeinde*, introduced in the 13th century and still existing in one canton and one half-canton. It offers in many respects a striking parallel to the Athenian assembly: it meets once every year and every adult citizen has the right to speak and to vote. The *Landsgemeinde* is entrusted with the passing of major political decisions and with the election of the cantonal government, the judges, and other cantonal officials. When I studied the *Landsgemeinde* in the 1970s and 1980s five were still left: in Appenzell-Ausser rhoden, Appenzell-Innerrhoden, Glarus, Obwalden, and Nidwalden. Three were discontinued in the 1990s and those in Glarus and Nidwalden are the only two still in operation.

In all five cantons the citizens vote by a show of hands. The chairman asks first the supporters and ca. 15 seconds later the opponents of a proposal to raise their hands. The hands are never counted. It is simply impossible, and if it had been possible it would have been too time-consuming. The presiding officials assess the majority on a rough estimate only. The voting procedure is basically the same in all five *Landsgemeinde* cantons, but there are variations and I will describe in more detail the method practised in Obwalden where the attendance was ca. 2,500–4,000 citizens, depending on the weather and the importance of the agenda.

In Obwalden the majority is assessed by a board of eight officials (*Weibel*) who stand on a platform raised ca. 1 metre above the ground. When both phases in a show of hands are over, each *Weibel* makes his decision about the majority and reports to the chairman. If six or more *Weibel* agree on the outcome of the vote, the matter is definitively settled, and the chairman proclaims the result. The whole procedure is over in about one minute. If less than six *Weibel* agree, the show of hands is repeated. If the second show of hands is equally ineffective, the chairman orders a division: all citizens must leave the assembly-place through two entrances, one for the ayes and one for the noes, and an exact count is made, abstentions excepted. But this happens, on average, only once in a decade, most recently in 1973 and in 1982.

With the Swiss *Landsgemeinde* in mind let me return to what Aristotle tells us, viz. that the chairmen of the meetings of the assembly, the nine *proedroi*, judge the votes taken by show of hands. The verb used by Aristotle (*krinein*) does not mean ‘count’; it means ‘judge’ or ‘decide’. So in the Athenian assembly the majority was determined by a rough assessment, not by a count, just as it still is in the Swiss *Landsgemeinde*. Seen in the light of the *Landsgemeinde* the verb used by Aristotle makes sense and we can now understand why there was a board of nine chairmen, and not the usual ten, one per tribe: there had to be an uneven number if the nine *proedroi* had to vote among themselves about the outcome of the show of hands. We can also understand why it was possible to file a sworn protest against the assessment of the majority and to have the show of hands repeated. That is in fact what happened during the second session of the trial of the eight generals in 406 B.C. Such a procedure

does not make sense if an exact count had been made. But if the majority had been roughly assessed a repeat is the obvious method to use if the show of hands results in almost a tie.

How reliable a method is a rough assessment of the outcome of a show of hands? In Athens the nine chairmen were selected by lot and served for one day only. It must have been impossible for them to acquire any particular ability in estimating the majority. Nevertheless my personal experience indicates that a count would simply be a waste of time and that an estimate suffices in almost all cases. When I attended meetings of the *Landsgemeinde* in 1977 and 1981 I found it astonishing how easy it is to assess a majority in a show of hands even in cases when the vote is almost a tie. I took photographs of some of the votes, enlarged my pictures when I came back to Copenhagen and counted the hands. My pictures confirmed that the majority in a show of hands in almost all cases is easily determined on a rough assessment.

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